

Identification of out-of-school children reaching the compulsory school age in Albania



Tirana, 2017.

Introduction

While the vast majority of children of compulsory school age in Albania are going to school, some remain excluded from education due to complex and overlapping factors, such as migration, extreme poverty, disability, parental attitudes or cultural practices, language issues or difficult family circumstances.

For the past decade, UNICEF has been working on the issue of out-of-school children with various partners. Since 2013, under the framework of the project “Every Child in School”, UNICEF and the Observatory for Children’s Rights, in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), have supported the identification of children (6 to 8 years old) failing to start compulsory education on time, and their enrolment in school.

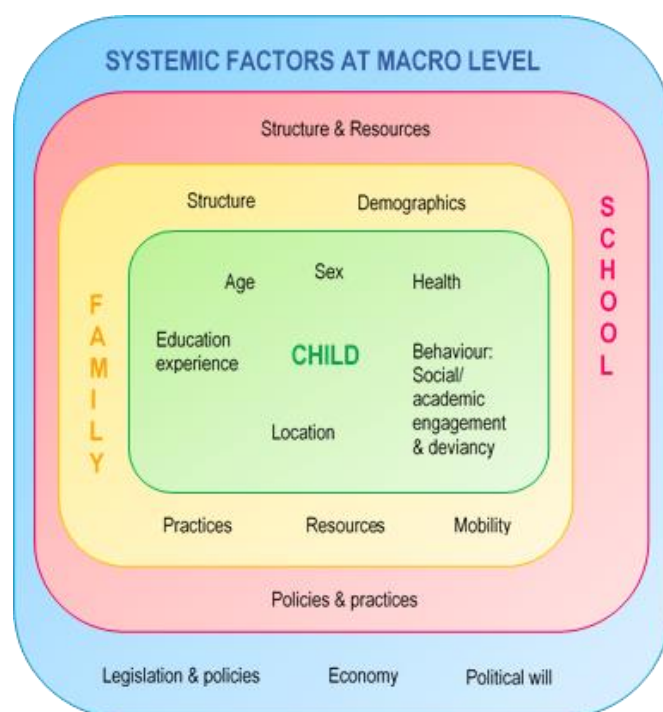
Out-of-school children

Out-of-school children are those children of compulsory school age who are not enrolled in and are not attending school. In some cases, children never enrol in school when they reach the compulsory school age. Some children enrol late and, for instance, enter the first grade of primary education at 7 or 8 years-old rather than 6 years old as foreseen by legislation. Other children attend school for a few years, but they drop out before completing the ninth grade.

A range of factors can impact parents’ decision not to enrol their children in school or to let them drop out of school. As children grow older they also have more agency in the decision process to remain in or drop out of school. Not enrolling in school or dropping-out of school is usually a process rather than a decision following a single (or exceptional)

event. This process is influenced by a range of factors summarised in Figure 1 below. Not all children presenting one or more of these characteristics will necessarily be out-of-school or drop-out from education, depending on their resilience and protective factors from their environment, their families and friends. The school environment and practices and the overall quality of the education system and other social services also have a significant role to play in helping children attend school regularly rather than accelerating their drop out process.

Figure 1. Non-enrolment and drop-out factors



Source: Adapted from Lyche (2010)¹

Out-of-school children in Albania

Out-of-school children in Albania include Roma and Egyptian children from families engaged in seasonal migration (internal and external), returnees, young carers, children contributing to the family income, early married girls and children with disabilities.²

¹ Lyche (2010) Taking on the Completion Challenge. A Literature Review on Policies to Prevent Dropout and Early School Leaving. OECD Education Working Paper No. 53.

²Zeneli (20) The Challenge of Documenting OOSC Progress and Experience in Albania: Review of the Pilot Project in the Regional Education Directorate

High unemployment rates, low life perspectives, lack of knowledge of the language of instruction, bullying and discrimination in school impact negatively on the motivation for education of families and young people. Some children also face administrative hurdles (children without official documents), particularly when enrolling in Grade 1.



National mechanisms for the identification and timely enrolment of every child reaching the compulsory school age

Following UNICEF “Zero School Dropouts Initiative” (2011-2013) and the evidence-building and advocacy work of many civil society organisations and donors, a Cooperation Agreement between four Ministries (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities) was issued in 2013 to organise the process of identification and registration of children reaching compulsory school age in education for a four-year period, until 2017. This was Albania’s first systemic attempt to respond to the issue of out-of-school children. In 2015, the agreement became an official regulation and all regions in Albania are today officially engaged in the identification of 6 to 8 years old children not yet enrolled in school.

The agreement outlines the roles and responsibilities of Regional Education Directorates (RED), Education Offices (in cities) and schools with local government stakeholders, namely: The Registry Office, the

of Durrës Region. Tirana: Observatory for Children’s Rights.

Child Protection Units, and the Health Centres.

The identification process is based on the collection and triangulation of lists of children in age of enrolling in Grade 1 from health centres, Civil Registry Offices (Ministry of Internal Affairs). The consolidated list of children in age of enrolling in Grade 1 is then compared to the list of children already registered in Grade 1 provided by schools. A list of school age children not yet enrolled is then compiled and sent to municipalities and police authorities for follow up with families through home visits. When children are located, families are encouraged to enrol them in a neighbouring school.



UNICEF and the Observatory for Children’s Rights developed a range of activities to contribute to the roll out and monitoring of the 2013 Agreement and 2015 Regulation at both local and national levels:

The Durrës Pilot

UNICEF and the Observatory for Children’s Rights implemented a two-year pilot (2016-2017) in the Durrës region to support and monitor the implementation of the 2013 Agreement and the 2015 Regulation. 10 schools participated in addition to relevant regional and municipal stakeholders identified in the Regulation: Regional Education Bureau/Education Office, the Prefecture, the Municipality, schools, the Registry Office, Child Protection Units, Health Centres, and the police.

Guidelines were developed for all participants to build their capacities regarding the implementation of the Regulation. Training

sessions, roundtables and workshops were organised, including:

- *Multi-stakeholder events* to (i) explain the role and responsibilities of each institution under the Regulation and their implementation processes, (ii) monitor progress and challenges throughout the implementation of the mechanism, and (iii) share lessons and good practices.
- *School-focused training and events* to raise awareness of directors and teachers on: (i) out-of-school children and the Regulation for the identification and registration of students in schools, (ii) dropout, including early warning systems that can be put in place at school level to identify and support students at risk of dropping out, (iii) school absenteeism and school transfer management mechanisms, and (iv) improving parental engagement and school-home relations. A peer mentoring process was set up so that each pilot school could train another school in the region on the Regulation, dropout prevention and data collection more broadly.

After a year of implementation, the Prefecture of Durrës organised peer learning meetings with the Regional Education Bureaus and Education Offices of the other 10 regions of Albania and the Ministry of Education to discuss implementation progress and remaining challenges.

Nationwide awareness raising and capacity development

Building on the materials and learning from the Durrës pilot, UNICEF and the Observatory for Children's Rights expanded their support to the implementation of the 2013 Agreement and 2015 Regulation nationwide through:

- **The development and dissemination of a manual for local level professionals.** The manual's objectives were to increase the

understanding of local officials on the issue of out-of-school children and raise awareness on their roles and responsibilities regarding the 2013 Agreement and 2015 Regulation.³ The manual was endorsed by all four participating Ministries and published on their website.

- **The dissemination of an information leaflet on Grade 1 enrolment for families,** providing information on (i) Grade 1 registration dates, (ii) the necessary documents to register a child in school and how to proceed when children do not have a birth or a vaccination certificate, (iii) the free transport and free textbooks schemes and their eligibility criteria.



- **The dissemination of media spots** on TV, newspapers and TV channels' websites, to announce the opening of the registration process for Grade 1 students for two consecutive school years (2016-17 and 2017-18).
- **Office calendars** (2017) with embedded information on the dates when each institution must exchange information, or take action, as per the 2015 Regulation on the identification and registration of school age children. The calendar was disseminated to all Regional Education Bureaus but also Prefectures, municipalities, health centres and police stations.

³ Observatory for Children's Rights and UNICEF (2016) Udhëzues për monitorimin e fëmijëve

jashtë sistemit arsimor (f JSA) dhe fëmijëve që rrezikojnë të braktisin shkollën.

- **Bulk SMS notifications** to local officials with responsibilities as per the regulation on the identification and registration of school age children. SMSs are sent ahead of the deadlines included in the 2015 Regulation to ensure timely exchange of lists of children, home visits and (re)enrolment in school.

In addition, UNICEF and partners also provided technical advice to the Ministry of Education and Sports on legislation revision (definition of absenteeism and dropout) and on the Education Management Information System (responsiveness of the EMIS to the issue of out-of-school children and dropout prevention).



Achievements

Albania has made some progress in the past years to ensure that all children reaching compulsory school age enrolled on time.

Legislative framework

The 2013 Agreement and the 2015 Regulation are the two cornerstones of Albania's approach to reducing the overall number of out-of-school children. When children start school on time, they are less likely to dropout. The 2013 Agreement, however, was only supposed to be implemented until 2017.

Albania is also in the process to finalise a "Regulation on the Administration of Pre-university Education in the Republic of Albania", which should be adopted early 2018. This piece of secondary legislation (sub-legal act) specifically addresses, among other things, out-of-school children, dropout, absenteeism and school transfer, which will provide an overall framework for secondary legislation in the future. This could also

potentially address the legislation vacuum of the end of the implementation period of the 2013 agreement.

Cross-sector collaboration

Activities conducted by UNICEF and the Observatory for Children's rights contributed to building a shared understanding within regional authorities, local municipalities and schools, of the complexity of factors at play in the issue of out-of-school children and the need for recognising, beyond personal and family factors, the responsibility of the system (education, health, child protection, social protection) when inadequately responding to these needs.

While previously different sectors felt that out-of-school children were only a matter for schools and the Ministry of Education, some degree of attitudinal change has been observed, and there is a better understanding of their shared responsibility over the identification and reporting of children out of school.

Through the implementation of the pilot and work at national level emerged the need for Regional Education Bureaus to nominate a focal point for out-of-school children. Most Regional Bureaus today have included out-of-school children in the job description of the officer in charge of Roma education and Special Needs Education. This facilitates cross-sectoral communication regarding the implementation of the Regulation.

In Durrës, cross-sector collaboration has improved. Professionals understand the need to act in the best interest of the child regardless of the potential weaknesses of the legislative framework, systems and processes.

Enrolment of out-of-school children

Following the implementation of the mechanism in Durrës, 33 children in age of enrolling in Grade 1 were identified as not being in school in 2016 and 13 in 2017. Other regions are currently compiling data.

There is reported evidence, in Durrës, that the number of children enrolled during the first registration session (The first registration session occurs in June and the second in September) has increased in 2017 compared to 2016, probably as a result of the information campaign conducted by the project. This is an encouraging result for children who will start the school year on time but also for the professionals involved in the implementation of the Regulation, as fewer children are likely to be identified out-of-school after the beginning of the school year, which will reduce their workload.

Two children (6 and 8 years old) in Sonila's family were identified as out of school through the implementation of the 2015 Regulation. When establishing contact with the family, the school and municipal representatives discovered that other children in the households were not attending school regularly. The school director and his team were equipped by the pilot to build a constructive relationship with families, which resulted in Sonila's two daughters, aged 11 and a 14, to attend Grade 2. Yet, long is the road, as municipal social services have limited funds to support the needs of all families in the neighbourhood. Several boys from the household are currently working to support the family and older teenage girls are caring for younger siblings.

School practices

Schools trained under the Durrës pilot confirmed the usefulness of the 2015 Regulation, which grants them access to lists of children living in their catchment areas. Schools have also become more aware of how they could support children to (re)enrol in school and to remain in school.

Improvement of EMIS

UNICEF technical support contributed to the inclusion of some indicators in the EMIS that will contribute to providing more accurate data on out-of-school children and dropout when EMIS is fully operational. Several indicators to identify students at risk of dropping out have also been included. UNICEF and the Observatory for Children Rights have trained pilot schools on EMIS data entry to support the implementation of the 2013 and 2015 Agreements, and fed back technical and data processing issues to local and national authorities to support the improvement of EMIS nationally. EMIS improvements have facilitated information sharing about children across Ministries and across professionals from diverse sectors at local level.



Challenges

Partial implementation

Despite the publication and dissemination of the 2013 Agreement and the 2015 Regulation, the mechanism to identify children in age of enrolling in grade 1 is only partially implemented nationally. In November 2017, only 2 regions had triangulated lists of children and conducted home visits to identify children out-of-school. Most other regions had compared lists of children from Health, Internal Affairs and Education but home visits by police officers were yet to be conducted. A few regions had not even completed the triangulation of lists of children. Officially, however, the 2013 Agreement should have come to an end in 2017. Its partial implementation to date points to the need to

expand the implementation period of the Agreement.

Delays in reporting from various agencies and schools negatively impact the education of children. Not only will some children not be identified and miss out on timely enrolment in Grade 1, but it is not in the best interest of children identified too late in the academic year to start school several months after their peers.

Issues related to the EMIS

While an EMIS software has been developed, Albania has not yet secured the necessary resources that would ensure that the system can be accessed by all schools every year. As a result, the EMIS was operational in 2016 but not in 2017, which is a major impediment not only to the implementation of Regulation 2015 on the identification of out-of-school children, but on the management of the education system as a whole. To date, the EMIS also only covers public schools. A functioning EMIS system is a prerequisite to a thorough identification mechanism of children out of school and of children at risk of dropping out.

Capacity gaps

Institutions involved in Regulation 2015 are facing various resource constraints. Health centres, for instance, lack human resources or IT equipment to compile lists of children timely and electronically. Many schools also lack the IT infrastructure and IT capacity to deal with the EMIS reporting requirements. The number of children to be visited at home is also a heavy burden on police officers' time, particularly since most of the thousands potential out-of-school children are in fact not physically present in Albania. Lastly, the Ministry of Education and Sports and Regional Education Bureaus demonstrate weak monitoring capacities.

Data inaccuracy remains a great challenge. Human errors when recording information on children whether manually or electronically, such as spelling mistakes in names and errors in dates of birth have required manual checking of hundreds of children's records, an unnecessary time intensive activity.

These capacity gaps result in more work for all involved in the identification of children. As an example, out of circa 7,000 children identified as potentially out of school in the Durrës region in September 2017, only 13 were not in school. All other children were either enrolled in other schools in Albania, which points to the inaccuracy of data provided by most institutions, or abroad.



Conclusion

“Every Child in School”, over the past four years, has aimed to support cross-sectoral work for all children reaching school-age to enroll on time, through raising awareness and building capacity of officials at local, regional and national levels. Supporting professionals from several sectors to work together at local and national level has proven challenging but all recognize the need for systematized team work and exchange of information about children. The Albanian approach has inspired other countries of Europe and Central Asia to engage in more cross-sectoral work regarding the identification of out-of-school children.⁴ While some progress has been achieved and the legislation temporarily improved, more time and efforts are needed for professionals, in all relevant sectors across the country, to acquire the understanding and skills for all children to enroll in school on time. More

⁴ See UNICEF and UIS (2016) Monitoring Education Participation: Framework for Monitoring Children

and Adolescents who are Out of School or At Risk of Dropping Out.

efforts are also needed in dropout prevention, for all children to complete compulsory education and, if possible, upper secondary education or a vocational education equivalent. Supporting professionals and practitioners is key, but more work is required with parents and community members as well to make the goal of every child enrolling, participating and learning in school a reality in

Albania. Lastly, the MoES has improved its EMIS system, including its functionalities for identifying children out of school and at risk of dropping out, but additional resources are necessary to ensure that the EMIS is functional and sustained overtime.

